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ABSTRACT

Lev Vygotsky and others have shown that "that which is within" is partly the product of socialization--a welter of competing claims, roles and voices. Teachers should aim, however, to achieve negotiation rather than suppression, transformation, or accommodation among these competing elements. With this in mind, 20 minority students at Baruch College in New York (where minority students are actually in the majority), were each asked to write a paper focusing on a personal issue, but "thinking through" the issue rather than resolving it. Reading the students' papers suggested that they ought to be encouraged to orchestrate their voices rather than to find a personal voice. Furthermore, instructors should focus on discovery rather than control, and problem definition rather than problem-solving. When teachers talk about what they want to see in their students' papers (and by extension in their students' lives), they should emphasize diversity rather than unity; interrelation rather than assimilation; and exploration rather than resolution. Teachers should be less concerned with what they want to hear and more concerned with what students might want to say. By teaching less and learning more, they could gain cultural understanding from their students. (Examples from student papers are included.) (PRA)

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George Otte

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The Diversity Within: From Finding One's Voice to Orchestrating One's Voices

What do writing teachers do--or should they do--for their students? That, quite properly, is often reformulated thus: what should the students do for themselves? A longstanding injunction is that they should find their "voices," and talk of late has turned to what sort of voice they should find. Here's one influential formulation of what the beginning writer must do:

> [He] must become like us. . . . He must become someone he is not. He must know what we know, talk like we talk. . . . He must invent the university when he sits down to write. . . . The struggle of the student writer is not the struggle to bring out that which is within; it is the struggle to carry out those ritual activities that grant one entrance into a closed society.

That is David Bartholomae. As much as I respect his work, I have to reject that formulation. My reasons are a complicated mixture of pedagogy and politics, but the crux is that split between inside and outside, private and public, personal and social. Lev Vygotsky, Mikhail Bakhtin, Shirley Brice Heath and others have shown how "that which is within" is also the product of socialization--not a single or singular product, not a stable identity, but a welter of competing claims and roles and voices. And my feeling is that what should happen among them is not suppression or transformation, not even accommodation, but negotiation.

This seems especially true of students at the City University of New York, where so-called minority students are actually in the majority, where nearly two-thirds of the students are female, where speakers of languages other than English are expected to preponderate by the end of the decade. At my own college (Baruch), for instance, 28% of last year's freshmen were Asian, 23% Latino, 20% black, and 22% white; 45% are non-native speakers of English.

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Must they become like us? Can they become like us? Do they even want to become like us?

Many answers to these questions have been offered, from analyses like David Bartholomae's to that of comparative anthropologist John Ogbu, from cultural studies proposals like Gayatri Spivak's to cultural literacy proposals like E. D. Hirsch's. But the people we have the most to learn from are the students, and I'd like to tell you what I learned from mine.

The freshman English class I taught last term was in many ways typical--only more so. Partly because of luck and partly odd timing, most of my students were alumni of remedial instruction. The only white male in the class was the son of Albanian immigrants; the only white female had taken off the fall term to have a baby. The rest sorted out into ethnic and racial groups with the usual complexity students reveal on close acquaintance. Of the five blacks, two were West Indian, three New York natives. Of the five Chinese speakers, two were from Hong Kong, one from the mainland, one from Taiwan, and one from the Chinese minority in Malaysia. Of the three Latinos, one was Puerto Rican, one Cuban, and one Brazilian. I had two Guayanese students: one a woman of mixed parentage (her father was black, her mother East Indian) and the other a male named Mohammed whose parents had emigrated to Guyana from Pakistan. Not counting him, I had five students, all women, whose people hailed from the Indian sub-continent: one Pakistani, four Indians. Of these twenty students, only five (two African-Americans, the Chinese-Malaysian, the Cuban, and Mohammed from Guyana) were male.

My syllabus for the course served me well, if only because it was so open-ended. I asked the students to do several short papers on the past and present experiences as they bore on the theme of education--what it is, what it would be, what it should be for them. The final, longer paper, entailing some research, was to be on what each saw as the (or at least a) major issue in her life--not as something to resolve, but as something to think through. That last project involved journal writing, two reviews of work in progress, and a final version.

I learned much that I needed to know from all the papers, but the great object lessons came in the long papers. The most astonishing is that I did not once need to tell a student to narrow her focus--or to broaden it, for that matter. My one strong directive was that each writer had to show me that her subject really mattered to her; consequently, even the more or less traditional papers came with a personalized twist. Melissa examined the problems of the Staten Island commuter--from the perspective of a full-time student who just had a baby. Mohammed thought through the logistics of setting up a small import/export business--from the perspective of someone who planned to do just that. Nikki treated the stigmatization and identity confusion of children from mixed marriages--as one such child herself. In other cases, the focus was not (or not just) personal so much as it was site-specific. Leslie-Ann, a Jamaican, puzzled through the tensions between West Indian blacks and those who were native New Yorkers--specifically as she experienced those tensions at Baruch. Boon Lim, the Chinese-Malaysian, argued against work restrictions

on immigrant students--particularly because he knew so much about how they affected unjust labor practices in Chinatown. Michelle, the Puerto Rican, wrote on the inadequacies of bilingual education as she saw them manifested among her friends and family.

All of the papers showed an unusual reliance on primary sources (notably interviews) and all gave some attention to what we might call the tensions between cultural constructs and individual identity--especially identity conceived as a potentiality rather than a reality, an open-ended possibility for self-realization. In some papers, this attention was foregrounded, above all in a fortuitous grouping: the papers written by the four Indian women. In hopes that the similarlities and differences among these papers and their writers will give some sense of both range and focus to my remarks, I will concentrate on this (again, fortuitous) group.

Let me tell you just a little bit about them, so you appreciate that there is indeed some range. Geetika and Shruti had come from developmental instruction, Geetika from the regular and Shruti from the ESL track. Priya and Guneet were more recent emigres--Priya had just two and Guneet just one year of high school in this country--but their levels of English proficiency were higher (a consequence, I gather, of the greater degree of English instruction they received in India). Geetika was the most "Americanized" of the four--she was, among other things, a volleyball star on athletic scholarship; Shruti was the only one of the four whose native tongue was not Hindi (but Gujarati); Guneet was the one Sikh, which made her more constrained by religion and tradition than the other three. There's an important point this limited

sample makes in a limited way: a pervasive form of American chauvinism is to think that we are the one great pluralistic society, and that we have adequately located or defined citizens or ex-citizens of other nations once we find out where they're from. Actually, India has greater linguistic, ethnic, and religious diversity than does the U.S., and this was one of the many things I needed my students to teach me about.

What Geetika, Shruti, Priya, and Guneet all had in common was that they all chose to treat the condition of women (Indian women more specifically and themselves in particular) in their longer papers. This was not entirely fortuitous perhaps--we had read a number of women authors, mostly on the theme of education. What's more, all four had just recently had the issue of gender foregrounded for them. Shruti and Priya had just recently entered the world of work for pay, and they chose to treat the role of women (again, women like themselves) in the workplace; Geetika's older sister and Guneet herself were being asked to submit to arranged marriages, and they chose to treat this as a topic.

What interests me more about their papers, though, is the more general but no less impressive similarities they shared with others in the class--similarities that were also differences from the stereotypical term paper. Perhaps in part because of my insistence that the students show, not just in conference with me, but in the paper itself why the topic was important to them, more than half the class took the relatively unusual gambit of the anecdotal opening. Even when the openings weren't anecdotal the writer's self-characterization was consistently the opposite of the

unfortunate know-it-all stance so many freshmen think they have to take. You know: "Here is the problem I've taken on (the plight of the homeless, world hunger, whatever); now watch me solve it in 5-6 pages." In striking contrast, my students consistently portrayed themselves as being in need of (rather than possession of) answers, hemmed about by constraints, vulnerable, even confused. Priya's opening is representative:

> I remember my first day of work. I stepped into the showroom, so scared and nervous. I remember when a friendly middle-aged American man stepped forward to greet me, I took a step back. The reaction was so spontaneous that it was too late to restrain myself. It was a voice inside me telling me that I was a girl and that I should keep my distance. I had kept telling myself to be more mature; then why did I feel uncomfortable as I shook his hand? Everybody feels uncomfortable on their first day of their first job, but I knew this was not what I felt. I felt I was encroaching on restricted territory. I felt I was defying unspoken laws of Indian society.

What I think you get a sense of here--what I saw over and over again in these papers--is the writer's sense of the complexity and power of the difficulties being addressed. (As Priya says later in her paper, "Although I would like to believe that I am going to be a woman of the nineties, all prepared with my college education to face challenges and achieve success in the business world, I know my unconscious socialization will present barriers at every step.") This sense of difficulty and complexity has a number of causes and consequences. First among them is the insistence on personal importance. The sophistication with which I saw social and cultural concerns treated--and the large, typically powerful roles they were given (or seen) to play--seemed to come across because of rather than in spite of the insistence on keeping things within the bounds of the "personal." It also helped, I'm sure, that I clearly

functioned as an ignorant audience. (Priya had to explain to me, for instance, why a male-coworker's offer of a cigarette during break was experienced as an assault on her character.) I had also said, remember, that the issue treated only had to be "thought through," not resolved. Surely this had something to do with the way standard modes of organization (cause-effect, problem-solution, etc.) were generally eschewed and the conclusions were consistently open ended, the problems left unsolved, the hopes for solutions deferred. Here's Shruti:

> The position of Indian women has improved but it is still going to take a lot of time to make it better. There are lots of things that need to be changed. Women can only change so much by becoming more self-reliant and self-confident. Traditional role models make her feel guilty if she does so, which sometimes stops her from moving ahead. Only a society that teaches women as well as men the dignity of education and labor will prevent the waste of so much talent.

Priya's conclusion, no less open-ended, is still more tentative:

> All women should ask themselves the question "Who am I?" William Chafe says the question "could be answered only if wives and mothers rejected cultural stereotypes and developed a life of their own outside the home" ("The Revival of Feminism" in <u>The Way We Lived</u>, 308). This will be more difficult for Indian women because the liberation movement for women has not developed among Indian society, and as it does it is likely to involve more compromise than rejection. In America, things may be no easier. Here the Indian woman's transition to a working woman includes responsibilities she has never faced before, coupled with the internal and external conflicts of merging with American society and at the same time retaining traditional values. Ultimately, my generation faces a larger responsibility: that is to groom the future generation. In the future, with our experience and knowledge about old traditions and new roles, perhaps we can inculcate, in both sons and daughters, the perfect blend of the old and the new values.

If that is utopian, it is also damned sophisticated, and one of the things that's so sophisticated about it--one of the pleasant surprises I saw generally--has to do with the handling of sources,

in this case, Priya's qualification of Chafe's announced need to reject stereotypes. Repeatedly in these papers, sources were qualified, resisted, reinterpreted from another cultural perspective, almost never plopped before the reader with a there-you-have-it air.

The most remarkable instance was also the most desperate case: Guneet's. She wanted to be a lawyer; her parents wanted her to submit to an arranged marriage. Though her husband had yet to be decided on, Guneet knew he would probably be from India (rather than the Sikh community in New York), and it was quite likely marriage would mean returning to India. Guneet was at such pains to explain, among other things, how difficult the practice of law is for women in India (the few female lawyers must often get male colleagues to make their court presentations) that I needed Geetika's paper to help flesh out Guneet's predica-ment--to explain, for instance, how being ostracized by the Indian community here in America (Guneet's fate if she defied her parents) would result in an isolation in some ways more complete than such ostracization in Indian society--where "love" marriages (as their called) can be viewed as charming anomalies.

Guneet was feeling pressure from such a variety of forces that her single greatest need was less to resist them or accede to them than simply (or not so simply) to give them voice. Here is her mother: "Guneet, you know how your father and I hate going against tradition even for your sake. We want to educate you just enough so you too can keep a check on your husband. Just remember this is all for your own good because a male ego is very fragile and it can

be threatened by women whose occupational status makes them achievers." Guneet interviews (and in-voices) two female lawyers who, alas, partly confirm her mother's logic. One, Lata, is an Indian whose husband is a lawyer of greater status, one who helps to "protect me from the complexities and hardships a woman has to face on entering the legal vocation in India." Sharon, an American practicing in America, reveals men "are scared of my high professional standing; in order to keep their egos intact they keep away from me." Though this prejudice keeps her unmarried, she feels relatively little prejudice on the job, certainly less than her mother and aunt (both lawyers before her) experienced.

These are not entirely adequate models for Guneet, so she turns to some of the authors she read during the term. She had been one of a group presenting Charlotte Perkins Gilman to the class--significantly, in this group of four women (Eliene [the Brazilian], Sharifa [the Pakistani], Priya, and Guneet), Guneet had chosen to represent the role of women Gilman had challenged; now she cites Gilman to suggest that, though Indian society suspects work for women would mean the neglect of motherhood, becoming a lawyer would give Guneet status "as a member of a civilized community, as an economic producer, as a growing, self-realizing individual . . . [who would be] a wiser, stronger, and nobler mother" (Casts, 373). As Guneet acknowledges, however, that is an argument, not necessarily a choice. She pulls back again later, resisting what the citation of another author might offer as an easy way out. (And now, with your indulgence, I'll read the last page of Guneet's paper.)

> Ever since I came to the States I can actually talk about what I want and question longstanding conventions, not just ignorantly follow what my parents want me to do. I agree with Adrienne Rich when she says, "Responsibility to yourself means refusing to let others do you thinking, talking, and naming for you; it means learning to respect and use your own brains and instincts. . . . It means that you refuse to sell your talents and aspirations short, simply to avoid conflict and confrontation" (Casts, 168).
>
> I don't know what the future holds for me and what Rich says could all be just idle talk if I do not have courage to stand up for what I believe in, the courage to decide on a career of my own choice. I feel myself being divided in two, one part wanting to be a dutiful and obedient daughter and the other wanting to be a lawyer to fight against injustices done to women. In the United States, that other part has a greater chance of being a victor than in India, but who is to determine who will win?
>
> At this point I cannot say as I am unsure of my future regarding where I will be, India or the U.S. It all depends on where I get married. If marriage takes place in India I can forget the idea of being a lawyer. But if it takes place in the U.S. there might be some hope of me going into the legal profession, assuming tht my future husband gives me permission to practice it. I cannot go against my husband's wishes as marriage is extremely important to me, more important than a career of my choice.
>
> Neither can I stop my parents from getting me married, and if I defy their wishes which is highly unlikely, they might cut me off totally from Indian society. I don't have any option but to agree with their wishes. My hope lies in my ability to persuade my parents and make them consider my point of view. I wish that this paper can influence some parents that are in a similar situation to keep in mind their daughter's aspirations and ambitions before making any decision that could change her life, even if it means going against a society's norms.

It's not hard to see what this paper does not do. It does not have what most teachers would call adequate coherence, closure, resolution. It does not solve its problem. It does not even adequately announce its purpose or its audience--though in our talks I had told Guneet that she could think of me as a father of a daughter (I am) if that helped her decide how to pitch things.

Still, think of what the paper does. It uses sources in a way that acknowledges their integrity, their cultural contexts, their

limitations for Guneet or her limitations for them. It acknowledges complexity and resists (quite bravely, I think) oversimplification. It clarifies the writer's priorities. (Guneet told me what the paper itself says: that writing it told her marriage was her top priority. That isn't what I would have had her opt for, but then they're her priorities, not mine.) And all that's just what it accomplishes from the writer's perspective. This paper also engages and moves its reader. It has said things I needed to hear, taught me as the father of a daughter and a teacher who needed teaching. It communicates much. It crosses cultures, both for Guneet's sake and for mine.

That's my story and my moral. Let me elaborate that moral just a bit. From finding one's voice to having a controlling idea, the metaphors and models for writing in academia stress unity, univocality, mastery, control. Maybe it's time to rethink those models and metaphors. Maybe it's time to think more about orchestrating one's voices than finding one's voice, more about discovery than control, more about problem-definition than problem-solving. When teachers talk about what they want to see in their students' papers (and by extension in their students' lives), maybe they should talk more about diversity than unity, more about interrelation than assimilation, more about exploration than resolution. And maybe teachers should be concerned less with what they want to hear and more with what students might want to say. Maybe the more important invitations to cultural understanding are the ones the students extend to the teachers, not the other way around. Maybe, for a while at least, teachers should teach less and learn more.